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ACCOUNT RESPECTING BELIEFS OF AUSTRALIAN
ABORIGINES.

THE paragraphs printed below are taken from the manuscript journal of an American sailor belonging to the Wilkes exploring expedition to the Antarctic Continent, 1838-1841. In November, 1839, the squadron lay in the harbor of Sydney, New South Wales. The writer was struck with the appearance of the aborigines, respecting whom he sought information. The notices which he cites present internal evidence of coming from a man of probity and observation, and contain some particulars which are not known to have appeared in type. The mention is here offered for what it may be worth, and as subject to the examination of special students informed respecting the race. For the communication of the material, thanks are due to Mrs. Andrew Chevalier Woods, Cincinnati, O.

December 1. — To-day we commenced taking on board stores and began to refit ship. Caulkers from shore employed, making everything doubly secure for to meet the hard service expected in the Southern Hemisphere. I visited the shore to-day, and in one of my rambles fell in with one of the aborigines, the most miserable and ugly of the human family I ever saw. They resemble baboons more than human beings. These natives are so little known in our part of the world that I have availed myself of the opportunity of getting information concerning them from different sources, all of which will be found interesting. The following account is from Mr. Armstrong, an English botanist, and who also understands their language, and probably knows more of their character than any other man.

None of the tribes with whom the interpreter has had communication seem to have any idea of God. He has very often attempted to convey to them the idea of a Supreme Being, the creator of themselves and every object of their senses, present everywhere and at all times, watching the actions of all men; adding that good men at their death ascend to him in the sky, but that bad men (instancing those who spear and murder others) are, when they die, banished from his presence forever. Their answer has generally been, "But how will God get us up to him in the sky? will he let down a long rope for us? What shall we live upon there? Is there plenty of flour there?" He has endeavored to explain this difficulty by describing that the Deity is a being of infinite power, capable of doing anything that appeared quite impossible to man.

They have but little idea of a future state, of rewards and punishments as the result of their conduct in a prior existence. They believe that the spirit of "Goor de Mit" of deceased persons pass immediately after death through the bosom of the ocean to some unknown and distant land which becomes henceforth their eternal residence. But in this latter particular the arrival of the whites among them has led to a total change of creed, for they very soon recognize among their new visitors many of their deceased natives and friends, — a delusion which exists to this day as strong as ever. They confidently recognized several hundred of the colonists by their countenances, voices, and former scars of wounds. They are quite positive that the reëmbodied spirits of Yogan, who was shot along with another, are already returned in the shape of two soldiers of the Twenty-first Regiment.

The obstinacy with which they persist in this conviction, that the whites are all incarnations of the spirits of some departed relative or friend, is so great that, notwithstanding the great confidence that they usually place in the interpreter, he has never been able to persuade them to the contrary, at least the old ones, but the young ones begin to have their faith shaken on this point. The name generally applied to the whites, when speaking among themselves, is Daingo, or dead.

They have shown some curiosity to know what sort of a place the land of the dead is, but not as much as might be expected. They have often asked the interpreter to sit down and tell them the names of such of their relatives as he saw there, and have often asked after particular individuals, — whether the interpreter knew him or her, or whether he is soon coming back, etc. He has never been asked whether the state of the dead was happiness or misery. They have often asked on what the spirit lived; whether they have plenty of flour; whether the flour brought by us is dug out of the earth there. They have seen wheat ground into meal in the colony, but they will not believe that the settlers have the power of changing that brown mixture into the same white flour that the ships bring here. What animals, ships, etc., are in that country; whether the country was too small for us, or what other cause brought us here. Whether we were not very sorry to leave our friends.

They consider the Malays, Lascars, etc., whom they have seen here, equally with the whites, returned spirits of some of their ancestors or friends, but who for some unaccountable reason have returned still black, and are regarded by them with evident dislike.

They attribute the change of complexion in the whites to their ghosts having passed through so much water in their posthumous trip through the ocean. They consider each settler to be a resident of

the district of that tribe to which, in his former state of existence, he belonged. On being asked how they came to spear the settlers if they considered them as their ancestors or friends, they have answered that, upon the whole, they consider they have treated the settlers well; for that, if any native stranger had attempted to settle among them in the same way, they would have done all in their power to have destroyed them. With respect to the change thus wrought in their views of a future state, many of them look forward to death as a positive gain which will enable them to come back with guns, ammunition, and provisions. They firmly believe in the existence of evil spirits called "Metagong," which prowls about at night and catches hold of them if they go away by themselves from the fire where the rest of the party lie, as to fetch water from a well, etc., by throwing its arms around them. The interpreter has met with several who say they have had such experience, but he has never heard, though he has put many questions on the subject, that any injury has been the consequence. Yet they certainly stood in great awe of it. They represent it to be occasionally visible, of human form, of immense size, and of such prodigious strength as to render resistance vain.

The Night Bird, which the settlers call "Cuckoo" and the natives "Pogoinit," are regarded by the latter as the cause of all boils and eruptions on their bodies, which they believe to be produced by piercing them with its beak in the night-time when they are asleep. The Wangal is an aquatic monster whose haunt is in deep waters. They describe it as having very long arms, long teeth, and large eyes, and assert it to have destroyed many lives. They give a confused account of its shape, but, from all they have said to the interpreter, their conception seems to be of a creature like an alligator. It inhabits most deep waters, salt or fresh, and almost every lake or pool is haunted by one or more of such monsters. It is quite certain that they do not mean the shark, for which they have a different name and of which they have no superstitious dread, and, besides, it is never seen in the fresh-water lakes.

There are certain round stones in different parts of the island which they believe to be eggs laid by the "Wangul." In passing such stones they are in the habit of stopping and marking a bed for them, but with what precise object has never been ascertained. They believe most thoroughly that certain individuals among them possess the power, by magic or enchantment, of healing any sores, severe wounds, pains, or diseases, and also affecting at their pleasure any malady or distempers, of which rheumatism and ulcerous sores are most common. These sorcerers are further supposed to have the power of raising the winds, and of bringing

on thunder and lightning, and of conducting the thunder to strike their enemies, but they do not know whether this is acquirement of faculty or natural endowment. The ceremonies used by the sorcerers in executing their magic power are blowing, snorting, making hideous grimaces and loud ejaculations. Allied to the magic power is another which they attribute to others of them who have the power to doom or devote others to a sudden death. This is believed to be effected by the person having the power of doom creeping on his victim like a snake, and pressing the victim's throat between his two thumbs and fingers. The death may not happen for some time, but the spell has none the less deadly effect.

They have several minor superstitions, viz. : That a fire must not be lighted at night, or stirred with a crooked stick, or otherwise some young child will surely die. To burn the blood of a wounded person makes the sufferer worse and endangers others. The Mingite, or flower of the honeysuckle, must not be eaten too soon in the season, or bad weather will be sure to follow. The relatives of a deceased person will not sleep in the spot where his blood was shed for months afterwards, not until a victim has been sacrificed to appease his spirit ; and the same avenging ceremony takes place in all places, whether the deceased died a natural death or not. They appear, however, to say that this intimation to the deceased of having been avenged must be thrown away. According to another of their superstitions already mentioned, by which he must be on his passage through or across the ocean. In one case, in which the body of a deceased European was opened at Pearth by his medical attendant, and as bad weather immediately came on, the change was confidently attributed to that operation. And they continue to this day to speak in terms of great horror of such treatment of the dead. There are certain hills which they consider unlucky to pass over, and all that pass over them will surely die. They have some wild and fabulous traditions of their own origin. They believe their earliest progenitors to have sprung from Emus, and been brought to this country upon the back of crows ; but from whence, the legend does not add. It is invariably believed that the women conceive in consequence of the infant being conveyed by some unknown agency into the mother's womb from somewhere across the sea. When a person is asleep in a deep slumber the interpreter has heard them say of him : " Now he is away over the water," meaning, as he has collected from them, that the spirit or mind which had come here an infant had gone back to its own country.

A tradition is also current among them that the whole native population of this country was, in distant ages, confined to moun-

tains ; that the different tribes now occupying the plain between the mountain and the sea are the descendants of a very few families who migrated into the country's plain at a comparatively late period ; but when asked whether any rumor had been handed to them of their plain having been covered with the sea before that migration, they laughed at it. They agree that the language of the mountain tribes, now differing very considerably from that of the tribes of the plains, was at one time their universal language, and that their own dialect is derived from the former. It is a remarkable fact that the mountain dialect is still invariably preferred and used for all purposes of a public nature or general interest, such as their formal public worships or discussions, battles, and hunting matches. It is a known fact that there is no trace of civil government among them with which the settlers have come in contact. There is no supreme authority, in peace or war, vested in any individual or chief, or any body of individuals. A family is the largest association that seems to be actuated by common motives or interest. They recognize well the right of property among them, both as to land and as to their movable effects, but they are in no way scrupulous in appropriating to their use lost property which they happen to find ; in such cases they make no inquiry about the owner, but take some pains to conceal what they have found. The only mode of enforcing their proprietary rights in case of trespass, by hunting or theft, is an appeal to arms ; in such cases, however, the thief stands on an equal footing and is not bound to give the aggrieved any advantage, as in certain other cases.